

A Piece of Gum on the Kitchen Table

by Livvy King

I am at the kitchen table. “Don’t tell anyone, you promise?” I look into my best friend’s eyes, which are the size of large grapes, filled with confusion and sorrow, but yet that “I can’t wait to tell someone” look. She nods her head up and down. The mortification and desolation take over, causing my heart to feel as if it is the rope in a game of tug of war. My four-foot tall body is twisted into a pretzel, trying to become so miniscule that it will disappear; to make it so nothing happened. To make it so my best friend is not here to witness it. I squeeze my eyes shut and wring out the tears, hoping that I might open them and be somewhere else, with another family; a normal family.

I open my eyes, and I am still here, in this sickening situation. And my best friend is here to witness it.

On the counter, there is a stick of gum. It is comforted by a shiny foil undershirt and blue paper jacket. So straight so stiff, so unknowing of the life that lies ahead.

I stare out at Steph as she walks toward her mother’s car. I wish I could go with her...and never come back. Instead I crawl up the stairs, push open my wooden door and see my chubby little puppy curled around my sunflower print comforter. Lying next to her, I massage her soft ear with my fingertips. She knows I am upset; I can see it in the depths of her eyes.

Staring through those eyes, not more than half an hour later, I can feel the warm salty water slithering from the corner of my right eye. A newly formed tear lands on the pillow. The phone rings, and I hear my mother answer. The woman on the other line is one of her most trusted gossip confidants, Steph’s mother. I listen for my mother’s voice, “No no, I’m fine...seriously. You don’t need to come over.” With the noise of my thoughts turning the conversation into a murmur. I begin to think about the possible reasons why God had chosen to put my sister on Earth and to put me in this situation. My sodden tears and runny nose saturate the pillow. Pound, pound, my head aches; it always does when this happens. The only thought I can speak is, “why?” This question, with a million answers, escapes from my lips and is caught by my pillow.

My mother comes in and sits on the edge of my bed.

“Steph promised she wouldn’t tell anyone,” I whimpered, with an uncontrollable sniff.

“It’s okay; she just wanted to make sure everything was alright.”

I cannot help replay the scene in my head over and over. I am haunted by the image of my mother’s face trying to defend the blows of my older sister Jordy.

“I hate her!” I begin to bawl so hard, my face engulfed by the pillow and my body shaking with every cry.

How could she hit her own mother? She is so much bigger, so much stronger. What is wrong with her?

My mother puts her warm hand on my back, sending a placating sensation throughout my body, then gently runs her fingers through my ponytail. The gesture is what I need the most, but it gives me no answers.

She picks up the rigid stick of gum and strips it of its attire. Its outer layers are no longer there to protect it from the gaping hole in her mouth. The pink, naked powdery stick of gum is placed on the moist sponge, which it folds in half.

My animated, attention-loving, seven-year-old body shelters what lies beneath. I love school; it is my escape. “Tiffany, you can write Livvy’s when you are finished with your assignment,” the teacher says with a skeptical glance as she places the chalk on the ledge. Sure, I milked it a little; any other fourth grader with a broken hand would too (even if it was their non-dominant).

I love my sister. She is the life of the party...amazingly witty...the one person you can talk to when you think there is no one left. That is, until the switch flips. Like the bystander of a dormant volcano, I pray that she will not erupt, but she always does.

“It is often expected, for example, that the older sibling will take care of and defend the younger children. Often the older child is left in ‘control’ or charge of younger siblings with the exception that they will take care of and protect them. Parents rarely hesitate to have the older child baby-sit and generally have complete trust in them” (Weihe 134).

“She can’t go swimming tonight, we think she might have broken her hand,” my mother says to the short, stocky man who was filling in for carpool that night.

“What happened?” he asks with genuine concern.

Creeping out from the living room, the little girl with uncombed hair, and a tear-stained face mutters, “We were playing tag and she fell on top of me.” I probably told this story thirty times or so, so much that I started to believe it myself. Why could my mom not have stayed home? She never listens to me.

There also are many instances where the child has disclosed these situations after a re-offence and is accused of just wanting attention or having learned this is a way to get “even” with their sibling. Furthermore, after a period of time, the adults are lulled into a sense of complacency and often leave the siblings alone, provide minimal supervision and even allow them to baby-sit. Often parents’ reasoning is, “We have to start trusting him/her again sometime.” (Faber 11)

The folded wet stick has now lost every bit of its original form.

If anyone ever says anything about her, I am the first to her defense. I love my sister. But if it were just the five of us, everything would be perfect. My parents would love each other. Our family would laugh together. I would be able to have sleepovers all the time, and no one would be there to humiliate me.

Forced to hitch a ride to soccer practice, I stare blankly at her as she sits in the driver’s seat of her Jeep Grand Cherokee. She inhales the white poison out of her cancer stick, whistling get out of the cars cracked window. She wears a look of arrogance that is so obviously fake, like concealing a weapon in saran wrap. Holding them until my head is about to explode, the words that I know are going to be trouble, jump out of my mouth and right into her magnified form of a “bad temper.”

“Can you please put that out just until I get out of the car?” I watch with the trepidation as the volcano begins to rumble.

“Jesus Christ, Livvy, you are such a f—in’ loser. Deal with it.”

I am not going to fight with her, it is not worth it. Just get through this twenty-five minute drive and you can get out of here. I HATE HER! Why should I have to put up with this? Ok, forget it, you can get through this; just do not let her get to you. That is what she wants.

She now puts all of the windows up on this beautiful day, trapping me in the unbreathable air, knowing that there is nothing that I can do about it. I try to forget her. I try to zone out into my

own world. I concentrate on the piece of gum that I have had in my mouth for nearly eight hours now.

It is amazing. I have had this gum forever, but it still has flavor. How does that work?

It was not until I left for college that I began to see the whole picture, and started to find her role in my life. It had been nearly four months; the longest duration of time I had ever spent away from my family. Finally...a chance to start over. I was able to walk into a new world, where no one knew me or my story. For a long time, I kept it hidden and allowed people to perceive me how I had always wanted to be perceived: a truly happy person who grew up in a wholesome environment, learning good morals and values. With every person I met, and new experience I have had, I learned to become more real with myself. If it is not a "Jordy" in their lives, it is something else; some obstruction that hindered them from the lives that they had always dreamed of. This realization finally put my anger and resentment to ease. For the first time in eighteen years, things made sense.

Sitting at the dinner table with all six seats filled was something that no one had seen in an entire year, but here we were. I look around at each of my look-alikes and our creators, and wonder if we are all really here. Several minutes have passed, and I am still unsure. We cannot be, there hasn't been one exchange of harsh words, and no one has stormed off. Something must be wrong. I take a look at the sister who has done so much wrong to me, and wait for someone to rub her the wrong way. Still waiting. Our forks are now scraping against our empty plates, and our laughing and story telling is still going. Suddenly, the tension that was built up in anticipation for misery has left my body. I join in on the side-splitting laughter, and allow this moment to become my favorite memory.

This is amazing. We have never been this good! Maybe it was me all these years that has made her so miserable. Maybe it was not. Maybe she has changed. Maybe she has not. All I care about right now is this moment. I love my sister, and I love my family.

I am sitting at my laptop, writing a paper about my older sister, pulling out every emotion that I have ever had toward her. The same tears that have flooded my pillow run down my face, and my heart is once again being tugged in two directions. I still fear that things at home are not okay, and I am not able to be there to fix them. To be sure, I punch in the ten digits on my cell phone and wait for an answer.

"Jord? Hey, what's up?"

"Hey Lou Lou, nothing much, how are you?"

I talk to my mother nearly every day. I have learned that Jordy is still Jordy, but not the violent teenage rebel Jordy. It is the crazy, funny, caring, witty, but still lazy, and unbearably annoying Jordy, who is still struggle to live with, but an immeasurable portion of all of our hearts. Just to hear her voice liberates a sigh of relief. Everything is okay.

The gum, which started off so rigid, so new, was molded by her tongue, then smashed by her teeth. When she dropped it out of her mouth, it became a part of the sidewalk, walked over, driven over and rained on, it became so flat it almost regained its original form.

